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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper examines discourses, studies, and practices associated with designating certain children and youth as "at-risk learners." Focusing primarily on children and youth in Canada, the paper contends that appropriate and effective responses to the problems of at-risk learners require a new approach that includes a better use of resources. The discussion begins with an assessment of the terms traditionally and currently used to define students with learning problems and how the terms themselves may be problematic. It then goes on to examine some of the key factors involved in the analysis and education of at-risk learners. It continues by outlining educational practices and school-community relations that are characteristic of a vision of schooling and child development based on the principles of social justice. Finally, the discussion concludes with arguments for ensuring that equitable educational opportunities are available to all learners, and for cooperation and coordination among schools, community networks, and public agencies. (Contains a short list of questions and recommendations, and 60 references.) (WFA)

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Risky Business? "At-Risk" Designations and Culturally Diverse Schooling

A discussion paper submitted to
The Council of Ministers of Education Canada
Pan-Canadian Education Research Agenda

March, 2000

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Introduction

This paper examines discourses and practices associated with the designation of specified categories of children and youth as being "at-risk" in terms of their potential failure to complete school and develop meaningful integration into out-of-school social contexts. We argue that effective responsiveness to problems related to "at-risk" learners requires a refocusing of much conventional policy and research, accompanied by informed political and administrative will, effective utilization of sufficient resources, and systematic co-ordination of existing knowledge bases about effective educational practices across professions and jurisdictions.

We begin our discussion with a critique of conventional discourse associated with the identification of learners as being "at-risk." We point specifically to the potential for such designations, however well-intended they may be, to become means by which power and resources are diverted away from constituencies that require them the most. Next, we examine some of the key factors involved in the analysis and education of "at-risk" learners. Although our focus has particular relevance to those designated "at-risk" through their status as members of social or cultural minorities, we are concerned with more general student populations as well. We then proceed to outline educational practices and school-community relations that are characteristic of a vision of schooling and child development based upon principles of social justice, arguing the need to locate effective strategies in integration of activities and initiatives across school, community, social structural, and public policy spheres.

Background – Public Education, Public Policy and "At-Risk" Designations

Public school systems in North America, from their inception, have been shaped by conflicting and often contradictory purposes. Factors like conformity, competition, knowledge transmission, and responsiveness to economic mandates coexist with commitment to democratic principles of diversity, inclusiveness, innovation, and personal development. Canadian educational developments have been characterized by growing recognition that uniformity in mass public schooling has had to give way to recurrent challenges to integrate varied and changing groups of learners and social environments. Schooling is continually shaped by distinct ideological and political choices.

Sensitivity to the dynamic nature of Canadian public education is essential for an understanding of the issues involved in the framing and emergence of educational practices associated with "at-risk learners." While widespread designation of learners as "at-risk," "disadvantaged," or "marginalized" is relatively recent, the identification of students with disabilities, specific needs, or other characteristics deemed by educational authorities to warrant special attention has a history nearly as long as that of public education systems. Cravens (1993) links the evolution of movements that promote the use of science as a tool for organized "child saving" to changing visions of normalcy in child development since the 1870s. Crow (1978: 217ff.), over two decades ago, identified 450 symptoms of difficulty experienced by young school-aged children deemed to be "at risk" in a review of the literature from the two preceding decades.

In keeping with analysis of the contradictory dimensions of education, it is instructive to understand that concern for the educationally disadvantaged emerged from

dual concerns both to provide opportunities for those students to gain benefits from formal education, and to minimize costs and disruptions that those "problem" learners posed to mainstream education (Franklin, 1994: 6). Throughout much of the twentieth century, however, various designations of students deemed to require "special education" came to be identified in medical or pathological terms that placed responsibility for learning disruptions or school failure on the individual or his or her cultural background. Increasingly, the concept has expanded from one based on presumptions of deficit in the learner, to encompass sensitivity to the educational, home and community environments that are core components of child and youth development.

Ironically, the "at-risk" terminology as applied to schooling was popularized through criticism not of learners but of the public education system as a whole, invoked most prominently in the United States in the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, entitled *A Nation at Risk*. In this usage, the argument was that the inferior education provided by the public school system was placing all children, and by extension the nation's prosperity, at risk (Boyle-Baise and Grant, 1992: 174-176).

The report itself has been overshadowed by continuing public debate in virtually all highly developed societies over what the purposes of public education should be, how educational outcomes should be assessed, and how successful schooling has been in achieving its overt objectives. Among the major points of contention have been differing conceptions about the contributions that schools are (or should be) making to economic advancement and the development of human capital in a framework of intensified global competition, as well as about how well schools are fulfilling their mandates to provide equitable opportunities for social, economic and political participation to all learners (Carnoy and Levin; 1985; Wotherspoon, 1998).

These tensions are evident in the ways in which school systems have become interested in, and treated, "at-risk" children and youth. It is striking, in this context, that genuine concern for the rights and needs of particular categories of learners has emerged within a period of educational reform marked by strategies to contain educational costs and to enhance schooling to become more responsive to a renewed drive for economic competitiveness. These factors affect the life choices and chances for all youth.

A widely-framed "at-risk" designation can be a useful tool for locating specific needs or conditions that affect particular categories of learners, but its application and implications must be employed with caution. As Fine (1993: 104-105) observes, attentiveness to the ways in which such concepts are culturally and socially constructed allows us to pose questions about who benefits from these ideologies and which aspects of reality are being ignored. The broadening of definitions of "at-risk" populations to incorporate increasing numbers of individuals and circumstances has mixed implications, reflecting both genuine concern for learners in troubled situations and potential for intervention without little critical assessment of the nature and need for such action.

In the United States, where a substantial body of research on "at-risk" learners has emerged over the past two decades, estimates cite between one-quarter and one-half of all students to be "educationally disadvantaged," and one-quarter to one-third of students are seen as "extremely vulnerable" to dropping out or experiencing other severe educational difficulties (Natriello, McDill, and Pallas, 1990:30-31; Waxmann, 1992: 1-2). Canadian agencies have begun to echo these assessments, suggesting that up to 30 to 40 percent or more of children are deemed to be "at-risk" for not completing high school and facing

personal developmental problems as a consequence of individual concerns (e.g., boredom, loneliness, personal health, and early childhood development), family status or difficulties, and/or peer, school, and community factors (Lenarduzzi, 1992; Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, 1999; Building Bridges With Children and Youth Committee, 1999). These risks are seen to be most heavily concentrated among visible minorities, the poor, residents of inner city and poorer rural regions, and individuals who are not fluent in the language employed at school (Guy, 1997; OECD, 1998: 5-6).

Canada's Youth and their Prospects for the Future

Canadian youth inhabit a rapidly changing world marked by considerable uncertainty over future prospects. Some commentators have even suggested that all youth, to a certain extent, can be considered to be "at-risk" in an economic climate characterized by rising youth unemployment, fragmentation of family life, public policy emphasis on resources for an aging population as opposed to children and youth, and increasing inequalities in the general distribution of resources (Côté and Allahar, 1994; Withers and Batten, 1995: 16-17). This point is more compelling when we consider the growing list of competencies identified for success in today's globally competitive environment, thereby also expanding the array of potential factors that individuals may be seen to be lacking in or viewed as "at-risk" (Withers and Batten, 1995: 7-8).

The consideration that all youth may be "at-risk" has a powerful ideological impact on public perception and subsequent policy intervention. Contemporary media accounts of problem or offending youth are fraught with the language of increasing risk and danger. The media often maintain the credibility of their accounts by appropriating the language and the voices of scientists. This biological language has political implications as it equates or at least associates issues of inherent or acquired physical and mental deficiencies with stereotypical race, class, gender, and geographic categories. As a consequence, it minimizes the impact that structural disadvantage has and enhances the influences of culture, biological traits, and familial behaviour. For example, much of the discussion that permeates the media surrounding fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) focuses on the chemistry and physiology of FAS and the ensuing potential for criminal behaviour. The oft-repeated relationship between mother's drinking and disrupted neurological development is presented as almost a singular explanation for poor education attainment and future adolescent deviance. The medical discourse simplifies issues of good and bad for public consumption while it tends to demonize and stigmatize only individuals and families who come under the scrutiny of the public eye, namely, marginalised, racialized and gendered families.

The same type of rhetoric is common in public policy directives in which risk is not only associated with future educational problems, but also with potential criminality. The National Crime Prevention Council issued a strategy for helping children from the prenatal stage to six years of age. Written in "crime prevention" language, the expressed intent of the strategy was to prevent future criminality by addressing issues of "risk" at early ages. Public policy pronouncements like the NCPC, however, use provocative and potentially dangerous language to make the point that criminals are predisposed either genetically or pre-natally to offensive behaviour largely as a result of poor pre-natal care (described as poor nutrition, poor parental attachment, excessive stress, and so on) or poor

maternal health. This discussion is presented against three other backdrops - a culture of poverty, parental discord, and poor parenting behaviours. While there are semi-truths embedded in these discussions, the fundamental focus is on poor, irresponsible parents, living in poor communities, who inadvertently predispose their children to anti-social behaviour. The final arguments are those that we see often in the literature on children at risk (Eron, Gentry and Schlegel, 1996), that if legal-therapeutic intervention does not occur in these early stages of child development, children "at-risk" run the risk of persistent delinquency that results largely from their inability to conform to conventional society, especially the inability to conform to the strictures of education.

Two points need to be raised with regard to the effects of the discourse of risk. First, the language of science by default decontextualizes the problems of children living in poverty. Although it cannot, by design, comment on anything else but the physiological nature of distress, the discourse of science has a strong political message: that badness and incompetence rest primarily with the biological results of bad parenting (beginning with conception). When this reasoning is placed within the context of poverty, the association between bad parenting and living on the margins of society becomes a powerful indictment of poor people. Second, this type of rhetoric often results in policy discussions that revolve around pre-delinquency. The forensic concern with trying to determine the potential in children to become delinquent has framed public policy at least since the inception of the Juvenile Delinquents Act. It does not matter whether there is scientific validity to the search for the potential delinquent (although the human genome project which is predicated on completely mapping the DNA molecule is justified by the genetic search for badness of all types). What does matter is that the search goes on and as it does, it legitimates one type of explanation for badness and incompetence and prohibits other debates. Essentially, the pre-delinquency discourse pre-empts discussions about unfair social structures, about exploitative adult-child relationships, and about irrelevant or unworkable institutions. As academics and educators, if we are not cognizant that "at-risk" discussions restrict the way in which we are able to speak to issues of child and youth welfare, we run the risk of engaging in ideological discussions that have, at best, short term therapeutic benefits and potential long-term disadvantages.

In fact, competing interpretative and policy frameworks accompany mixed prospects faced by youth. On the pessimistic side, observers from various ideological vantage points highlight several reasons for concern, such as continuing trends in family breakdown, high rates of youth unemployment, especially relative to older workers, poverty rates that affect at least one in five children and youth, suicide rates that are higher among teens than for any other age cohort, the increasing amounts and proportions of education costs borne by individuals, disturbing levels of alcohol and drug abuse and violence experienced by youth and/or their caregivers, and additional threats to physical and mental health complicated by erosions in public health and welfare systems. There is a further danger in assuming that universal high school completion is a good thing without parallel concern for the extent to which those graduates will have access to quality employment (Marquardt, 1998: 58).

Conversely, reasons for optimism are suggested by an aging population profile that may lead to improved employment opportunities for young workers in coming years, increasing levels of educational attainment and rates of volunteer activity among youth, and general progress towards improved health status and living conditions. Moreover, with

regard to formal schooling, children and young adults, regardless of their own educational accomplishments, place tremendous faith in the association between educational attainment and future success in life endeavours. The majority of youth across diverse social groups and circumstances express optimism about their futures and express high degrees of commitment to and value on the importance of formal education in their lives (Krahn and Lowe, 1999). Comprehensive overviews like the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (see, e.g., Ross, Scott and Kelly, 1996) and the Canadian Council on Social Development's annual reports on *The Progress of Canada's Children* bear out these complex realities (see also Guy, 1997: 153ff.).

Regardless of one's perspective, it is important to acknowledge that the benefits and hazards associated with being young are not equally distributed. Poverty, social and economic marginalization, and other risk factors are most strongly experienced by people in selected groups, including Aboriginal youth, immigrants, and those living in inner cities and remote rural areas. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge even within these groups profound variations in circumstances.

Two significant trends emerge with respect to sociodemographic changes among Canada's children and youth. First, processes like immigration and internal migration, economic restructuring, and domestic relations are contributing to increasing social diversity. In 1996, for instance, slightly more than ten percent of children under age 15 had a mother tongue that was not English or French. Recent immigration patterns, with growing concentrations of immigrants from many non-traditional nations, particularly in the Middle East and Asia, suggest that those proportions are likely to increase, particularly in the larger urban centres. The proportion of the population who identify themselves as visible minority increased from 6.3 percent in 1986 to 11.2 percent a decade later, seventy percent of whom were born outside of Canada. (Statistics Canada, 1997a; 1997c). Aboriginal populations are projected to have even higher growth rates, with one-third of Aboriginal people under fifteen years of age in 1996. Among Aboriginal people, as with immigrant populations, regional variations are also significant, with much higher than average concentrations and growth rates on rural reserves, in the western provinces, and in the northern territories (Statistics Canada, 1998). Further diversity is generated through changes in areas like employment structures, family patterns, and economic inequality (Statistics Canada, 1997b; 1999).

A second, related, trend is evident in the observation that, amidst social diversity, increasing proportions of the child and youth population are situated in circumstances commonly deemed to be vulnerable to risk factors. Many of the highest population growth rates and projections occur in target groups noted earlier, including segments of the Aboriginal population, children who do not speak the language of instruction, visible minorities, children living with lone parents, the poor, and those living in regions with limited social and employment prospects.

These trends carry significant implications for educational policy and practice. With respect to the latter observation that there are likely to be growing concentrations of children and youth in situations currently defined as "at-risk," schools will need to pay increased attention, and devote larger proportions of their resources and programming, to ensure that the needs of specific target groups are being met. However, when this factor is combined with the wider tendency towards growing social diversity, it is essential that schools be prepared to embrace all social groups.

What is being suggested here is that, even we reject the most alarmist projections of the rising proportions of "at-risk" learners, schools need to broaden their concern for a wide spectrum of student groups and needs. To a large extent, the designation of special categories of learners becomes less important than the need to consider how schooling can be positioned to become more responsive to diverse general needs and interests in the communities it serves. The sections that follow highlight some of the important understandings from theory and practice that must be balanced in order to respond adequately to these realities.

The Need to Employ Caution in How We Define and Introduce Interventions Based on "At-Risk" Terminology

The designation of "at-risk" poses a dilemma in the sense that, while it is necessary to identify specific segments of the school population for successful intervention, labelling of problem populations may create stigma, self-fulfilling prophesies, or inappropriate attention on certain individuals to the neglect of real problem sources (Natriello, McDill, and Pallas, 1990: 3). Several groups have begun to raise questions about why so many students are becoming categorized in special or designated groups (Wang, Reynolds, and Walberg, 1995: 8-9).

Not all members of minority groups or individuals in positions designated "at-risk" will experience behavioural problems, failure, or other negative outcomes. Even for those not so designated, childhood and adolescence are characterized by various passages in which many individuals may find themselves in risky circumstances, often only temporarily, such as parental separation or divorce, family relocation or migration, experimentation, rebellion, or association with troublesome peer groups, that may not have any lasting significance. Gilbert *et al.* (1993: 23), for instance, observe in their analysis of early school leavers that nearly three-quarters of youth in categories constructed to constitute the most high risk group were successful in completing high school diplomas. Similarly, data on registered Indians reveal that large proportions of those who leave school early eventually return later in life to complete high school or enter post-secondary or vocational programs (Santiago, 1997: 9). Many immigrant children, too, can be considered part of transitional population in the sense that, while they may lack fluency in English or French at the time of entry into Canada, the likelihood that they will succeed in school, with proper educational support is strong, given higher than average levels of educational, occupational qualifications, and social supports observed among many immigrant groups (Beiser, Hou, Hyman, and Tousignant, 1998; Statistics Canada, 1997a).

Schools and other institutions, therefore, must exercise flexibility as they respond to factors through which children and youth may experience significant problems in at least some important aspects of their lives. Often, it is not these factors in themselves that are risk-inducing, but, rather, the position that they are placed in within specific institutional contexts. The impact of hunger, racism, violence, serious illness or disability, inability to speak English or French as a first language, and other circumstances become problems only when students are placed in environments that are built around expectations and practices dependent on specified conceptions of normality. Several observers caution that language identifying children as being "at-risk" can serve as a euphemism for racism, class-based biases, sexism, or regional inequalities. Children from less privileged class backgrounds

are more likely than others to be placed in special education classes (Curtis, Livingstone and Smaller, 1992: 88-89). Schools can be "risk-inducing phenomena" by contributing to cultural hegemony and failing to adapt to and embrace minority cultures (Gordon and Yowell, 1994: 59-60). Rural schooling as a whole may be risk-inducing insofar as districts have a limited tax base, restricted local opportunity structures, few local role models, and little direct school relevance to local communities. The irony is that those schools deemed to be most effective in rural areas are the ones whose graduates leave the community for further education and employment opportunities (DeYoung, 1994: 248-249). Lee and Cunningham (1997: 60) argue that
"at-risk" populations may not be properly served because "those who pay for the public services are not the same people who receive the services."

Several examples illustrate the dilemma that "at-risk" designations play when they frame public policy. In January, 2000, the City of Saskatoon implemented a policy of drug use education for street children and youth, directed primarily at those involved in the sex trade. The city to this point has been relatively unsuccessful in dealing with the sexual exploitation of children and youth and has implemented several reactive measures to fix the problem. Their focus on drug rehabilitation for street kids, while logical in a therapeutic paradigm, is doomed to futility for several reasons, not the least of which is that substance abuse can be a rational way to normalize an otherwise brutal existence. By focussing on the therapeutic, the city's social services has followed a tradition of intervention that is based on the flawed nature of the client rather than the flawed nature of the society, and the discourse of social services becomes part of a discourse to stigmatize the oppressed.

Substance abuse education programs offer another example of a therapeutic rhetoric and emphasis on "at-risk" behaviour may conceal underlying social conditions. Substance abuse by youths is portrayed as irresponsible behaviour that is indulgent and self-destructive. In fact, youths often emulate adult behaviour or attempt to live-up to the expectations of adults as a result of the stresses and strains of a world in which youths have little political and economic impact on the way society runs. Adolescent abuse of drugs and alcohol is frequently a result of relative powerlessness, as evident in research that illustrates that marginalized youth and youths from indifferent families are at greatest risk from substance abuse. More importantly, substances like alcohol that place youths at extreme jeopardy are legitimately produced and acclaimed as part of the good life, especially in commercials for beer and wine. As adults use alcohol as a social convention and a social crutch, they restrict its use to youths of a certain age. The grim reality, of course, is that underage youths have easy access to alcohol and are literally at risk from its dangerous effects. Similarly, as mentioned previously, street youth use and abuse alcohol and drugs because it helps them normalize marginal and traumatic existences.

When youths abuse drugs, the drugs that place them in jeopardy are commonly ones produced for therapeutic reasons. For example, in the United States, the drugs that send most teenagers to emergency rooms are Tylenol, aspirin, and ibuprofen. Out of all the emergency room visits for substance abuse for youths, 71% were for pharmaceutical overdoses, 15% for alcohol, caffeine and drugs combined, and only 14% for street drugs (Males, 1996). However, the therapeutic response is often that substance abuse by youths is irresponsible behaviour that is indulgent and self-destructive, a rhetoric that hides the larger structural realities of substance use and abuse.

In Canada, the increasing use of Ritalin to control children and youth who are unable to fit in a regular classroom situation - diagnosed as attention deficit disorder - results in much of the drug ending up on the street, used in combination with other pharmaceuticals (Diller, 1998). An equally pressing problem is that Ritalin use on hyperactive or attention deficit disorder children and youth has increased 4.6 times in Canada since 1990 (Chisholm, 1996). The implications of this are staggering given evidence to suggest that attention deficit disorder is difficult to define, let alone diagnose. Some doctors regard Ritalin as a panacea for youth attention problems - and prescribe accordingly - while others regard it as a dangerous narcotic. In some communities, like Vernon, B.C., ten percent of eleven year old boys were found to be on the drug (Rees, 1998). Significantly, Sweden banned Ritalin in 1968 because of heavy abuse (Diller, 1998).

The grim reality is that Ritalin has dangerous side effects, including drug dependence, headaches, eye and mouth tics, insomnia and long-term risks from cancer and chronic depression (Diller, 1998) but is an extremely lucrative amphetamine for its manufacturers. Social commentators, in response, have argued that in a climate of fiscal restraint and consequent larger classroom sizes, teachers are using Ritalin to manage inordinately large and diverse student contexts. More directly, it appears that we have chosen, very unapologetically, to ignore the environment in which we place our children and youth and to focus on the more lucrative more compelling world of individual sickness, deviance and risk (Livingston, 1997: 17-18). The official language of substance abuse is based on the individual-level pathology of being "at-risk." The larger, hidden, and more important reality is that youth, in many respects, are victims of an adult world where a "business as usual" ethics frames the danger which jeopardizes the health of Canadian adolescents.

A recent report from the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reveals how the paradigm of "children at-risk," as part of the discourse of medicine, has served to permit the expanding psycho-pharmaceutical intervention of medicine into education. The report stated that in America, the use of psychiatric drugs (primarily Ritalin and Prozac) in two to four year olds had increased by 50 percent between 1991 and 1995 (cited in Saskatoon *Star Phoenix*, Feb. 26, 2000: A3), Despite considerable medical acknowledgement that the long-term effects of the use of such drugs at an early age are unknown, doctors continue to prescribe them to pre-school children and parents continue to accept the diagnoses of their hyperkinetic children. This is done, ostensibly, to prepare potentially pre-delinquent children for a "normal" school life.

The Overlapping Nature of Personal and Educational Difficulties and the Need for Integrated Services

There is widespread agreement that risk factors are layered or overlapping in the sense that individuals are commonly in situations in which various problems compound one another (such as the associations among poverty, hunger and health problems, or deviant activity and difficulties in school), and the probability that those with multiple problems are most likely to have these translated into later difficulties in school and other social settings. One of the main strands of development in these regards is increasing

emphasis on early intervention in family/community prior to school (Keating and Mustard, 1996).

We have stressed that there are both advantages and dangers to an understanding of the multifaceted nature of risk factors and educational difficulties that broadens the scope of possible programming responses and interventions beyond the individual learner and the classroom. Increasingly, both researchers and policy-makers are coming to highlight the need for an integrated approach that brings schools into closer connections with parents and communities while supportive internal linkages are fostered among programming, instructional practices, and general environments within schools (Abdal-Haqq, 1993; Manitoba, 1993: 44). Some, like Jensen and Stroick (1999) advocate comprehensive policy intervention premised on the need to strengthen child development by promoting initiatives to support three interrelated "enabling conditions" of adequate income, effective parenting, and supportive community environments.

Despite this new awareness, there remain substantial limitations to the ability of educators and other service providers to ensure that equitable educational opportunities are available to all learners. Fragmentation is prevalent in many programs directed to disadvantaged students. Among the most common of these are programs that are often narrowly framed and delivered, limited sharing of information (across professions, units or jurisdictions), duplication of services, gaps in knowledge/understanding of students' backgrounds, and little or no effective monitoring of interventions (Wang, Reynolds, and Walberg, 1995: 8-9). Many educators report that effective programs are often undermined by additional difficulties such as serious funding and resource constraints or problems of "overload" with insufficient long-term commitment or resource caps far below what is required to sustain existing programs and not able to accommodate further growth. Teachers, as well as social workers, counsellors, community police officers, and other contact personnel, may have excessive caseloads, and are only accessible to select groups of students for limited periods of time. If student support services are remote from school, students have to leave the building for appointments, causing further interruptions and loss of class time even though these are the students with the strongest need or desire for greater involvement in classroom situations.

In short, while there is growing acceptance of the view that schools should be "neighbourhoods/communities of support" (Altieri, 1991: 26; Gagné, 1996: 314; Lugg and Boyd, 1993; Wehlage *et al.*, 1989), we are a long way from systematic cooperation and coordination both within schools and through effective liaisons between schools, other public services, and community networks.

Growing Attentiveness to Notions of Resilience and Other Capabilities

In response to previous models that highlight a problem-oriented approach to "at-risk" status as a position of deficit, many observers have turned their attention to the notion of "resilience" (Henderson, 1997; Jenkins and Keating, 1998; Wang, Haertl and Walberg, 1998). This conceptualization enables researchers and educators to understand prospects for nearly all students to benefit from educational environments. A preoccupation with "fixing problems" has meant that school success is viewed more in negative terms as outcomes produced by the avoidance of behavioural problems and dropping out rather than

an understanding of what schools can do to support positive development (Zeldin and Price, 1995: 6-7).

However, in order for such endeavours to be successful, there needs as well to be a broadening of understanding about multiple competencies that students may bring with them or develop through schooling and other life experiences. McGinty (1999: 136-137), for instance, finds that, contrary to arguments that students with multiple stressors in their lives may do poorly in school, in fact female students with considerable family responsibilities develop a "toughness" that can be transferred to school success. Schools that adopt high expectations, rather than reduced standards, are repeatedly observed to produce more positive outcomes among minority students and other groups of at-risk learners. Moreover, research on informal learning suggests that students from all backgrounds, and especially those from cultural minorities and less privileged circumstances, have strong capabilities that are not acknowledged or even undermined in conventional school situations (Livingstone, 1999). This is often true, as well, in the wider community, where social and cultural resources such as the presence of Aboriginal elders or individuals with special skills or life histories are often ignored or not represented as legitimate learning resources. At the same time, attentiveness to the diversity and richness of the backgrounds that students experience also allows us to focus on learning-related difficulties in relation to the need for basic survival or life skills, or hot lunch programs, rather than simply as factors related to deprivation or absences in students and family lives.

The following excerpt describes how one inner-city elementary school in Saskatoon attends to the life contingencies of its students by recognizing the resiliency of a student who would otherwise be considered high-risk:

> this program demonstrates the inherent goodness in children despite the hatred and mistrust we see in the media. Principal Schmidt, for example, talks of instances in which an elder child has come to school out of control and verbally abusive; as the staff examine the roots of this behaviour, it is often found that the student's parents or guardians have been drinking and fighting all night, the student has to make breakfast for his or her siblings and get them off to school and then has to get him or herself ready for school, all the while observing or experiencing abuse and neglect. When framed in this context, the achievements of the student are remarkable, responsible, and benevolent by any standard. The school is prepared to treat such kids with the respect and tolerance they deserve, especially given their outstanding display of responsibility in the face of extreme adversity. The school, in turn, makes every effort to place siblings in the same classes or at least to provide them with opportunities to see each other, given the importance of family and caring that children often demonstrate (Schissel, 1997).

Climate and Practices Developed Within Specific Schools Do Make a Difference

With acknowledgement of the need for linkages between schools and other agencies, we must not lose sight of what schools themselves can do. Many schools have demonstrated effectiveness in attracting students, improving attendance and graduation rates, and fostering other positive outcomes, through concerted efforts to demonstrate

positive leadership, school climates characterized by equity and stability, and variety in instruction and management practiced by skilled teachers (Druian and Butler, 1999). Alternative schools that combine a deliberate "culture of noticing and caring" with a philosophy of personal responsibility contribute markedly to student success (Gregory, 1995: 150). Terms like "spirit of caring," "warmth and openness" and an "ethos of belonging and support" pervade descriptions of schools that are hailed as effective in promoting success among their students and the communities they are situated within (see, e.g., Archibald and Haig-Brown, 1995; Maguire and McAlpine, 1995).

Won Ska Cultural School in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, is a good example to demonstrate potential possibilities for an integrated community-based school and the obstacles that prevent it from becoming an acceptable framework for education, especially for children and youth who live on the margins of society. Won Ska deals with First Nations street kids and adults who generally have been in trouble with the law, i.e., students who are identified by social services as "at-risk."

Several things are remarkable about the school with respect to its need and effectiveness. First, for many of the students who have been in trouble with the law, school is the only place where they can deal with the issues that resulted in their legal problems. Second, effective schools deal with the transition from childhood/adolescence to adulthood as a fundamental priority. The school, therefore, is administered in a democratic context in which students have the final say in their educational development. To this end, the teacher as mentor is of deep importance. The mentoring process includes not only training and the transmission of knowledge, but also the creation of a mutual, idea-sharing context in which the mentor listens as much as s/he speaks. For many of the marginalized students in this school, the vacancies in their lives have included a concerned and tolerant audience; a physical and emotional safe haven; a place where what they say is as important as what they learn; a chance to influence their life circumstances; an opportunity to make explanation and reparation; and a chance to see and emulate responsible, ever-present adults.

The last point frames this new paradigm of learning. It is through interaction and emulation with caring adults that marginalized youth develop the skills to do the day to day tasks that facilitate living, to understand what constitutes responsible parenting and responsible intimacy, to overcome the frustration that lands them in trouble, and to learn to trust people in authority. The majority of students in alternative education programs (students who are mostly from the streets or who are in young offender alternative measures programs), whom we have interviewed, have expressed an overwhelming fear and distrust of police and other legal officials and a generalized discomfort in conventional schools. Significantly, many of these students, when asked where they would be without an effective alternative school, immediately responded that they would likely be in jail.

A blending of alternative education and law takes the legal system away from punishment and into the realm of healing. It is at this point where schools such as Won Ska provide an important antidote to the stigma of at-risk designations. They do so in two very fundamental ways.

First, they focus, almost exclusively, on the future and essentially ignore the histories of their students. In so doing, they eliminate labels such as "at-risk," "young offender," or "high needs," in order to focus on what the students need to develop intellectually and socially. This policy of discarding labels is very much in accord with

First Nations spirituality and healing which focuses on the elimination of guilt and blame from the healing process. At a very basic level, the concept of "at-risk" is one of blame. Importantly, this education-based approach to youth justice does not preclude the courts and the police. On the contrary, it asks that policing and jurisprudence expand to incorporate issues of social justice, social and personal health, and preventative social reform. In short, the schools, in concert with the legal system, become places where high risk children, youths, and adults learn not only educational and occupational skills (and meaningful apprenticeship) but also the skills for meaningful citizenship.

Second, the school operates on the basis of consensus, with top-down authority minimized to the point at which students decide on curriculum, marking, school social events, and school administration, which are imposed in traditional systems. The rationale for doing this is their perspective that one of the basic problems for marginal youth (but all youth more generally), is their disenfranchised position in the world. By investing their lives with volition, the school seeks to demonstrate that, despite the labels that have been placed on students, their present role is one of importance and credibility. The result is that the retention rates within the school are amazingly high; when students discussed their educational satisfaction, their main comments focused on their wish to stay at school 24 hours a day.

The basic problem for Won Ska School, despite its record of success with highly-damaged students, is that it is constantly fighting for enough physical and financial resources to provide a comfortable school, and is continually fighting for credibility. The school poses several problems for the local school board. It defies a standard curriculum and replaces it with a student-driven program. It insists on a mentoring model of learning that often involves one-to-one learning which is expensive. It ignores the offender/risk label of the students and refuses to engage in dialogue with the school board and the community focussing on high-risk, potentially dangerous students. Lastly, it allows students to remain in school as long as they wish, some well into their twenties, and this violates the traditional educational focus on high school only as a place for adolescents. All of these things that make Won Ska a highly successful alternative school are the things that jeopardize its existence.

Nutana Composite High School in Saskatoon provides another example of a clearly defined Integrated School-Linked Services program to deal with youth in trouble. Between fifty and seventy percent of the student body are clients of social services at any one time. Eighty percent of the students in Nutana are designated by the courts and social services as "at-risk." The school addresses the problems of these highly stigmatized students in several ways. They structure the needs of the students as individually as possible within a standardized curriculum. These needs are dictated by the students and are dependent on their life situations. For example, Nutana has a very well-run program for single-mothers. While this program provides important educational opportunities for mothers and day care for children, it also provides a context in which the fathers can be involved with the children, a school atmosphere in which being pregnant or having a baby at a young age is not a stigma (although it does counsel pregnancy prevention), and a climate in which being a young mother (or father) does not place the baby at-risk and does not have to impair the educational and social development of the mother or father. The school also tries to incorporate students and former students into the teaching process as student aids, as facilitators in different types of therapies, as potential future teachers, and more broadly in

youth leadership roles. The importance of this program, above and beyond the obvious advantages, is that the students who were once labelled as "at-risk" become mentors and role models. Their stigma of being diagnosed is replaced with the honour of being respected.

As with Won Ska Cultural School, Nutana works very hard at diminishing at-risk designations by providing the students a context in which they feel valuable and in which the public sees students as productive and influential. Interestingly, Nutana's policy of using community resource people as much as possible provides the opportunity for mainstream adults to interact with youth designated "at-risk" as real people, an important part of dealing with the therapeutic, socio-legal discourse of offender/risk.

Questions and Recommendations

Many jurisdictions contain examples of innovative programs and educational structures in public and alternative schools. Some of these are described in case studies, but we need to compile much of this knowledge, and to develop research and practice that draws from the experiences of participants (administrators, educators, students, and those working in affiliated agencies) with regard to an assessment of the successes, limitations, dangers, and needs that arise from those programs. Several important questions for further research and consideration arise from these experiences and our analysis.

1. How can we make schools a more supportive, caring environment for all participants? Is it as simple as making sure that students have a profound impact on the constitution of the school, including curriculum, discipline, rules of conduct, and staff hiring decisions? Can the school system be reconstructed to run on democratic principles that enfranchise youths as the primary stakeholders?

Given previous observations that large numbers of school dropouts do return to school, and nearly all plan to do so, more attention needs to be given to how schools can become more welcoming places, not just for their immediate clientele, but also for older learners who have experienced disruptions in their schooling.

2. How many students are labelled "learning disadvantaged," what kinds of education are they receiving, and with what kinds of learning and life outcomes? What are the immediate and long-term implications for these students? Are there alternative ways to provide effective educational programming for these learners? Can we use existing alternative education examples as templates for providing for students who do not fit within the conventional structures of education? Greater attention needs to be given to documenting and analyzing learners in special education and related classes and programs, across jurisdictions.

3. Do schools need to reorient their mandates to become communities for children and youth instead of rigidly structured institutions? Effective strategies to ameliorate problems associated with "at-risk" learners cannot be isolated to schools. Action must be oriented to the underlying social and economic conditions that produce poverty, violence, family disruptions, and other major social and individual problems. The philosophy that the school is the primary community for children and youth in a world structured by and for

adults needs to be recognized. As such, the school system needs to incorporate greater adherence to democratic principles into its administration, as exemplified by some of the foregoing descriptions of alternative and exemplary schools.

4. To what extent, and by what means, can we realistically promote integration of services in schools, or in facilities directly linked to schools? What are some of the community resources that can be drawn upon, and in what ways, especially for those in situations defined as disadvantaged? Sufficient resources are required to ensure that children and youth have ready access to the attention and services they need. Bringing the community into the school not only provides greater access to services, but provides the context through which the community can learn about children and youth, and the means through which informal educational resources can be acknowledged.

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